

# Mecklenburg County COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal Task Force Draft Recommendations



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# A Letter to the Community



***We dedicate this work of recovery and renewal from the impacts of COVID-19 in our community to the victims of this pandemic crisis and to their families and loved ones.***

The impacts of COVID have been far reaching. Everyone in Mecklenburg County has been affected. Some in our community have been, and continue to be, much more affected as existing inequities and disparities are exacerbated by COVID-19. Widening equity gaps are the most insidious of all negative impacts from COVID-19. We have placed primary importance on addressing inequities, reducing disparities and supporting those most harmed or likely to be harmed both in the short term and in the long term by the impacts of COVID-19.

As we recover and renew, we are in a moment of profound and long-lasting change. This is a moment to help those in need right now, and also to seize a chance to address inequities and injustices that have been a part of our history for too long.

In this moment, we are hopeful, not fearful. We are determined, not fatigued. We are focused on action. We are resolved that we can and will meet the challenges we face together.

Signed,

The members of the Mecklenburg County  
COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal Task Force

# A RESOLUTION TO FORM THE MECKLENBURG COUNTY COVID-19 RECOVERY AND RENEWAL TASK FORCE

**WHEREAS**, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created an ongoing state of emergency in the County of Mecklenburg, the City of Charlotte, and surrounding Municipalities; and

**WHEREAS**, Governor Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency for the State of North Carolina on March 10, 2020 and issued Executive Order No. 116; and

**WHEREAS**, Mecklenburg County, in conjunction with the City of Charlotte and the six towns within the County, signed a Joint Proclamation of State of Emergency on March 13, 2020; and

**WHEREAS**, in the short period of time since March 2020, COVID-19 has spread rapidly, causing sickness and death of Mecklenburg County residents, thereby necessitating significant response actions; and

**WHEREAS**, the spread of COVID-19, together with the necessary public health measures taken to limit its spread, already have imposed, and will continue to impose, significant costs, financial and otherwise, on Mecklenburg County residents and businesses; and

**WHEREAS**, the economic impact of COVID-19 is considerable, including the loss of revenue to support county operations and lowered revenue projections; and

**WHEREAS**, COVID-19 has further exposed the fatal consequences of racial disparities in America, and specifically has exacerbated pre-existing disparities in our community when it comes to public health, mental and emotional health, hardships suffered by working families, housing and homelessness, employment, education, business, and the non-profit sector, among others; and

**WHEREAS**, COVID-19 is not just a global health crisis, but a social and economic crisis, the effects of which will be felt for years to come; and

**WHEREAS**, the scope of this impact is broader than the subject matter of any existing standing committee of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners; and

**WHEREAS**, COVID-19 continues to pose an immediate and significant threat to the health, safety, and well-being of the people of Mecklenburg County; and

**WHEREAS**, a coordinated, county-wide effort is needed to help facilitate our recovery and renewal efforts, including the deployment of federal CARES Act and other state and federal funding intended to address the negative effects of COVID-19, and to assist Mecklenburg County in deploying resources appropriated in the FY2021 budget for recovery and renewal from the impact of COVID-19; and

**WHEREAS**, forming a recovery and renewal task force will allow the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners to be pro-active in addressing the needs of our residents through legislation and coordination across sectors as the pandemic progresses, will allow discussion on the particular impact of COVID-19 to occur in a centralized setting, and will help the County formulate a broader post-crisis recovery and renewal effort that builds a stronger, safer, and fairer economy and community; and

**WHEREAS**, time is of the essence in activating our recovery and renewal efforts;

## **NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT**

**RESOLVED**, that the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners does hereby establish the Mecklenburg County COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal Task Force ("The Task Force") for the purpose of addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Mecklenburg County; and be it further

**RESOLVED**, that The Task Force's work to support the recovery and renewal of Mecklenburg County from COVID-19 shall be governed by the following principles: (a) that recovery and renewal should not be a return to "business as usual"; (b) that recovery and renewal, above all, must be guided by an adherence to public health and scientific expertise, in order to assure the safety of those who live in our County; (c) that excellent public services, public investment and increased community resilience will form the most effective basis for recovery and renewal; and (d) that recovery and renewal must address issues of equity that have been laid bare by the impact of the crisis; and be it further

**RESOLVED**, that The Task Force shall examine, surface, and help address COVID-19 impact issues that are specific to workers, businesses, public health, education, the economy, and the overall well-being of the residents in Mecklenburg County, and shall strategize around, formulate policy considerations for, and develop a comprehensive Recovery and Renewal Plan of Action (or a limited series of plans) to be presented and recommended to the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners for approval and action in the following substantive areas:

- ▶ Access to health care and eliminating health disparities
- ▶ Mental and emotional health
- ▶ Economic recovery, including help for small businesses
- ▶ Non & profit recovery & human services
- ▶ Education & childcare
- ▶ Working families and vulnerable populations
- ▶ Housing and homelessness
- ▶ Jobs and workforce development
- ▶ Food security
- ▶ Arts and culture

The action plan (or plans) shall include and incorporate recommendations from the County Manager's Business Roundtable; and be it further

**RESOLVED**, that the County Manager is directed and authorized to help form the structure of The Task Force, and shall assign appropriate staff from various county departments, retain appropriate expert assistance, and recommend a budget for The Task Force's work; and be it further

**RESOLVED**, that the Board of County Commissioners will appoint the chair (or cochairs) and members of The Task Force from nominations received from Board members and the public.

ADOPTED the 2nd day of June 2020.



## OUR CHARGE

We were charged by the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners on June 6, 2020 to develop recommended recovery and renewal actions across ten impact areas, including:

- ▶ Access to health care and eliminating health disparities.
- ▶ Mental and emotional health.
- ▶ Arts and culture.
- ▶ Economic recovery, including help for small businesses.
- ▶ Education and childcare.
- ▶ Food security.
- ▶ Housing and homelessness.
- ▶ Jobs and workforce development.
- ▶ Non-profit recovery and human services.
- ▶ Working families and vulnerable populations.

## PRINCIPLES

We have been guided by four key principles in crafting these recommendations for recovery and renewal.

- ▶ recovery and renewal should not be a return to “business as usual”;
- ▶ recovery and renewal, above all, must be guided by an adherence to public health and scientific expertise, in order to ensure the safety of those who live in our County;
- ▶ excellent public services, public investment and increased community resilience will form the most effective basis for recovery and renewal;
- ▶ recovery and renewal must address issues of equity that have been laid bare by the impact of the crisis.



## PROCESS

We have gathered and analyzed research and data within each of these impact areas, consulted with subject matter experts, organizations and institutions most experienced in each of these areas, and acted as colleagues in shared work to help craft these draft recommendations with the support and assistance of professional staff and consultants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS STRUCTURE

Our actions for consideration by the Board of County Commissioners and the community across the impact areas are organized to promote clarity and enable partnership, collaboration and cooperation.

**Focus Areas** - three broad areas for action in Health, Community and Economy sectors that encompass the ten impact areas.

**Core Goal** - a primary future outcome we wish to see for the residents of Mecklenburg County in each Focus Area as we recover and renew from the impacts of COVID-19.

**Strategies** - approaches we believe Mecklenburg County can deploy collectively with partners and stakeholders needed to reach the recovery and renewal Core Goal.

**Why** - rationale, data and reasoning for our strategy and approach based on gaps, barriers, challenges and opportunities we see after careful study and review of information from subject matter experts, available data and research.

**Actions** - specific steps to help our community recover and renew.



## EXPECTATIONS FOR CHANGE

We believe these recommended actions are important steps forward and depend on partnership, collaboration and cooperation for success. These recommended actions do not solve all problems, meet every challenge or fulfill every opportunity presented by our history and by COVID-19.

## RECOVERING AND RENEWING TOGETHER

We are mindful that this work and these recommendations must and should build upon the work of countless partners, stakeholders and initiatives. Our path forward together must be traveled with the benefit of aligned efforts including the work of Leading On Opportunity around economic mobility, strategic plans from our city, towns and county governments, plans and priorities of our non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, initiatives and priorities of the philanthropic community, faith communities, grassroot organizations, the private sector, and the wisdom and energy of dedicated residents and leaders at all levels.

## NEXT STEPS

The next steps include:

- ▶ Building awareness of these draft recommendations.
- ▶ Review of draft recommendations for critical gaps with experts and the community.
- ▶ Approval from the Board of County Commissioners of final recommendations.
- ▶ Timelines and progress indicators for final actions after adoption by the Board of County Commissioners.
- ▶ Implementation of final recommendations.

A photograph of three smiling grocery store employees. In the foreground, a woman with long brown hair and bangs, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt and a tan apron, looks directly at the camera with her hands clasped. Behind her, two men are also smiling. The man on the left is wearing a white shirt and a tan apron, and the man on the right is wearing a brown polo shirt and a tan apron. They are standing in a grocery store aisle with shelves of products in the background. A large, semi-transparent geometric graphic, consisting of overlapping triangles in shades of gray and red, is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**“The impacts of COVID-19  
pandemic have highlighted  
already existing health  
inequities and disparities in  
our community.”**

# Recovery & Renewal Focus Area:

## Our Health

### Impact Areas:

**Access to health care and eliminating health disparities.**

**Mental and emotional health.**

The physical and mental health, safety, and well-being of the people living and working in Mecklenburg County have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted already existing health inequities and disparities in our community. These inequities acutely impact racial and ethnic communities (Black/African American, Latinx, Asian, Native American), immigrant communities, low-wealth families, older adults (60+ years of age), homeless persons and people with underlying medical conditions. Significant access barriers to quality health care have been made more substantial for many of our community's residents, particularly for underserved populations within Mecklenburg County. These access barriers include:

- ▶ lack of information about, and low awareness of, available health care options;
- ▶ real and perceived affordability issues;
- ▶ obstacles of distance, transportation and time to reach health care providers;
- ▶ weak local/neighborhood community connections and understanding of needs;
- ▶ lack of medical insurance coverage;
- ▶ hesitancy and fears about connecting with health care systems and institutions;
- ▶ on-going social stigmas related to mental health issues;
- ▶ insufficient training about, preparation for and consideration of, diverse cultures;
- ▶ insufficient coordination of health capacities and resources across the community.

Our community must take significant action to enact a comprehensive COVID-19 health recovery and renewal effort that can help address both immediate needs and historic health care inequities and disparities. The recommended Health actions illuminate a path forward for health equity in Mecklenburg County.



## CORE GOAL

# Reduced Health Disparities and Inequities through Expanded Access to Medical and Mental Health Care

Access to mental and physical health care is a key factor in recovering and renewing from the negative impacts of COVID-19 for everyone in the community. We identified needs, gaps and opportunities related to health care access together with related goals and recommended actions to increase access to health care and, in turn, reduce or eliminate health care access disparities and inequities.



## STRATEGY

### Empower people, providers and partners with health care information.

Help expand access and reduce inequities by ensuring that all residents of Mecklenburg County are aware of their health care choices and options, know where to go, who they can trust to meet their needs, and feel empowered to fully utilize available health care options across the community.

Health care providers can best meet needs when they are knowledgeable about the health care needs, challenges and opportunities facing residents of our community, especially those of underserved, vulnerable and undocumented residents.

Access to accurate, reliable and clear information is critical for health care partners in order to catalyze collective action, make connections across services and providers, and build trust among residents and providers.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- The quality of health care within Mecklenburg County is hampered by lack of communication and awareness coupled with misinformation and miscommunication on key issues. Limited understanding of important health topics such as symptoms, diagnoses, treatment, management, and prevention drives distrust and hesitancy within the community, especially of available tests, treatments and vaccinations related to the COVID-19 virus.

- ▶ Significant populations within Mecklenburg County, including ethnic minorities, economically challenged residents, older adults over 60+ years of age, and undocumented immigrant residents are not empowered with information they need to best access and benefit from health care options. There is also significant hesitancy and fear towards health care facilities, health care providers, and treatment options among undocumented residents.
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- ▶ Healthcare providers sometimes lack strong roots of connectivity and stability within neighborhoods and communities of people, reducing their ability to provide care and hampering residents' abilities to make good choices about their healthcare needs.

## ACTIONS

1H

**Create and implement a comprehensive health communications and community outreach/engagement program.** Provide health education and build health care literacy for wellness/prevention, chronic illness management and choices for care. Use proven methods and unconventional avenues of communication to reach and fully inform all residents, build trust and provide peace of mind to undocumented residents, vulnerable populations and older adults. Special attention must be paid to building trust with diverse communities and to creating content and messaging that is culturally relevant. Information should be made available in multiple languages.

2H

**Conduct an on-going, annual COVID-19 data collection and community survey.**

Assess the current and on-going impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey should yield information about the general population, data by race, ethnicity, pre-existing conditions, and disability with insights into geographic areas of concern. Particular focus should be made on assessing impacts on undocumented residents, ethnic minorities, vulnerable populations and older adults. This data will enable the community, leaders, health care providers, partners and residents to understand and track how specific populations and communities continue to be impacted by COVID-19, target response efforts, identify and address disparities, and evaluate and refine responses.

3H

**Partner with healthcare providers and specialists to host public health forums.**

Build health care awareness and allow people to learn about community health concerns (i.e., community health disparities, chronic disease, mental health, epidemics, and prevention). Public health forums can be held digitally and in-person, with televised local broadcasts to educate the community on specific health topics. These forums can be sponsored and informed by health care general providers, health care specialists, area universities and colleges, professors and researchers with expertise in key areas.

#### 4H

**Connect with visual art professional and students, schools, universities, organizations and street artists to create educational content via neighborhood art.** Engage people and promote health care access with the partnership and talents of local artists and creatives. The content can promote positive health habits, safety and prevention as well as treatment and care options across a variety of content types (visual, musical, performing). This content can be shared in a variety of ways that match the behaviors and habits of residents including community events, social media and other platforms to reach people.

#### 5H

**Partner with local faith communities, higher education institutions, libraries, athletic facilities, grassroots networks and community organizations for outreach.** Create content and distribute accessible, multi-lingual information and materials that make it easy for leaders, connectors and organizations at the ground level to share health care information and options to their networks, colleagues, people they serve and people who gather in trusted places.

#### 6H

**Evaluate and extend the County COVID-19 Ambassadors Program as an Epidemic Prevention Ambassadors Program.** Diverse ambassadors who together represent our total community can help provide training and certification for local businesses, schools, places of worship, government, and other community gathering facilities on how to safely adapt operations in case of an outbreak. If an outbreak occurs that threatens the health of the community, ambassadors can assess local establishments for meeting proper protocols. Ambassadors can also direct tips from community members about facilities that do not comply with guidelines to appropriate agencies.





## STRATEGY

### **Build trust through grassroots and community connections.**

Help expand access and reduce inequities by linking the resources of large organizations and institutions to the built trust, relationships and awareness of smaller grassroots and community-based organizations.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ People build trust with, and act on information they receive, first from people they have established relationships with, and institutions and organizations they are familiar with and interact with regularly.
- ▶ Centralized, large organizations have resources but sometimes lack the critical earned trust, social capital and established relationships to deploy those resources effectively if they are alone in reaching people and opening access to health care. Together with grassroots and community-based organizations (CBO's), the resources of larger organizations and institutions can drive better access and better health care outcomes for Mecklenburg County residents, especially underserved and vulnerable community members.

## ACTIONS

**7H**

**Identify and make more available (existing or new) a directory of grassroots and community-based organizations (CBO's) that are health care and health education advocates.** Connecting with community-level organizations begins with knowing who they are, who they serve and support, where they work and what services they provide. In a time of crisis and critical need, rapid access can enable quick connections and more effective responses. For recovery and renewal efforts, making visible a network of trusted partners and stakeholders in communities enables longer term investments, committed actions over time, and ability to connect the dots among trusted, but sometimes under the radar, key organizations and leaders in communities.

**8H**

**Encourage healthcare providers to partner with at least two trusted community organizations operating in marginalized communities.** These partnerships can offer health care supports to local residents through familiar and trusted sources and help major healthcare providers plant roots of connectivity and stability within communities.

**9H**

**Expand the County's community health workers program to help build relationships, understanding of needs, and awareness of resources between healthcare providers and residents in local areas and communities.** These neighborhood-level liaisons can help educate and update providers on community health needs and concerns based on feedback and input from the community. Liaisons can help build trust, offer practical guidance for outreach, operations and service supports based on local knowledge. As trusted connectors in communities, liaisons can reach people at the ground level to connect them to health care options and resources available to them.

**10H**

**Place health information boards/stations in popular community places and spaces.** Places where people naturally gather offer points of contact for health care awareness. These places include theaters, shopping malls, grocery stores, pharmacies, parks, stadiums, recreational centers, libraries, assisted living facilities, faith communities and shelters. Public gathering spots offer opportunities to share information, build awareness, fill gaps of understanding and correct misinformation. Kiosks for printed and/or digital content and materials in multiple languages can help build awareness and offer education to people who may not feel comfortable reaching out directly to organizations or institutions.





## STRATEGY

### **Reduce time and distance barriers separating people from their health care options.**

Reducing or closing the gaps of time and distance that separate people from health care providers and resources is a vital part of opening health care access in our community.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ Some residents lack dependable, convenient transportation options (their own vehicle, shared vehicles or good access to public transportation) that enable travel to health care providers. Some residents face financial obstacles related to transportation and travel for health care, either due to low available financial resources to pay for or hire transportation or because lengthy travel time to health care providers means extended time away from work, resulting in loss of wages and income.
- ▶ Residents of Mecklenburg County experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness face additional obstacles to health care access and providers that may be distant from their temporary locations.

## ACTIONS

**11H**

**Create or identify an existing map/directory of area clinics and health care facilities and make these locations easily available to the public.** Information on the locations and availability of health care providers in local communities is key to successful efforts to meet health care needs in underserved communities. Based on gaps revealed by this data, plans can be made to provide or create permanent health care facilities and clinics, or to provide regularly scheduled services to residents in underserved areas via mobile/pop-up clinics that can meet basic, appropriate health care needs.

**12H**

**Outfit and deploy mobile health care clinics.** The county health department, with help from major healthcare providers, should create or augment existing mobile health clinics and deploy them on a regularly scheduled basis to areas where permanent health care facilities are lacking and to areas with high concentrations of homeless residents. Monthly mobile clinics can offer wellness and prevention information, basic screening and immediate care, vaccinations, exams and other baseline health care services and supports. The clinics can also be stocked with hygiene kits and first aid packs available to residents who may need basic health care supplies.

**13H**

**Develop and deploy a Health Transportation Service.** Partner with Atrium Health, Novant Health, CATS, driving services, and/or community organizations to develop a Health Transportation Service to provide community members with dependable transportation options to the nearest clinics/health facilities. Healthcare providers can sign up to be included in the regularly scheduled pick-ups and drop offs transportation route, as well as community establishments such as YMCA's, places of worship and schools who would act as pick-up and drop-off points. Efforts to request public transportation service routes to include these neighborhoods are also recommended, in long-term, to help make travel to clinics and other healthcare facilities more accessible.

**14H**

**Offer Health Tailgate events.** Create quarterly “Health Tailgates” to be sponsored by Mecklenburg County Health Department, with help from both major and minor healthcare providers, and hosted in communities where access to adequate and equitable healthcare service is poor. The tailgate event would feature food, entertainment, information stations from health care providers and assistance services and a mobile health care clinic. The tailgate would also feature brief health education seminars and demonstrations on topics of health, safety, and prevention. Charlotte sports teams could support tailgate events to demonstrate community involvement in responding to the impacts of COVID-19.

**15H**

**Create Medical Homes.** Provide marginalized communities with medical homes as safe places of health care for residents to receive affordable health care services, provide educational opportunities, and promote wellness. Medical homes are envisioned as integrated places of communal interaction, not only for a continuity of care, but also as communal involvement connectors. Medical homes could be connected through the County transportation network.





## STRATEGY

### **Reduce health care affordability barriers.**

Provide free or significantly reduced cost health care to individuals and families who, without financial assistance, would have very limited or no access to proper health care.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ Individuals and families struggling financially are often hesitant to seek health care as housing payments and putting food on the table take priority in daily lives. Decisions made not to seek preventative and wellness care, regular health evaluations, and treatment because of financial concerns can set up a chain of negative health impacts as undiagnosed or untreated conditions worsen. Among the impacts of COVID-19 has been loss of jobs, wages and health care coverage in our community that add additional financial pressures and increase health care cost hesitancy.

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- ▶ Delay in the diagnosis, treatment and on-going management of medical conditions leads to declining quality of life and the need for more urgent and expensive treatments that in turn drive increased financial hardships. Many common chronic conditions (heart disease, cancer, diabetes) can be treated at lower cost and with preservation of quality of life if diagnosed early, treated quickly, and managed over time by patients and health care providers. When financial fears stand in the way of these early interventions, chronic conditions worsen and lead to later emergency interventions, hospital stays, specialized treatments and long-term care or supports that are far more costly and perpetuate a vicious cycle.

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- ▶ These negative impacts are particularly harmful among two overlapping populations in Mecklenburg County for whom access to health care is statistically more likely to be blocked by financial concerns: a) members of racial and ethnic communities (Black/African American, Latinx, Native American); b) individuals and families who are below the poverty line or struggling on the edge of economic security.

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- ▶ Undoing the financial knot of access to affordable health care can address health care inequities and close gaps of prevention, regular care and treatment that will stop this chain of events from occurring.

## ACTIONS

16H

**Increase public funding for safety net providers and promote the use of community clinics, free clinics and Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs).**

These providers currently offer services to underserved populations and can reduce disparities in the community for care related to COVID-19 and basic health care needs. Of important focus are residents meeting Medicaid eligibility and uninsured individuals and families.

17H

**Expand support for sliding scale fees based on income at Mecklenburg County health care facilities.** If fully waiving fees is not possible, consider additional investments in the existing scaled fee structure based on income.

18H

**Advocate vigorously to expand Medicaid in North Carolina.** As of June 2021, North Carolina is not among 37 states (and DC) that have accepted federal funding to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Expansion of Medicaid would boost the health and financial well-being of low-income and uninsured residents and families and reduce uncompensated care costs from emergency room visits in our hospital systems.

19H

**Develop a comprehensive community health care affordability study.** The study should include a scan of health care costs in Mecklenburg County in comparison to similar communities and identify best practices to serve low-wealth, undocumented, uninsured and Medicaid recipients. The study should also make recommendations based on national research for funding mechanisms and policies to best meet the needs of our community's residents who face economic hardships and have been most impacted by the effects of COVID-19 and historic health inequities.



## STRATEGY

### Enhance coordination of our community's health care efforts.

Coordination of efforts, sharing of information and data, and establishing infrastructure for comprehensive planning and synchronized deployment of health care programs, services, resources and facilities can improve our community's overall ability to recover and renew from the impacts of COVID-19 and to address historic health care inequities.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ Our community is fortunate to be home to two large health care systems, a high-quality public health department, a network of public providers and effective non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and community-based organizations (CBO's).

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- ▶ In general, we have rallied and joined together to face specific challenges and opportunities such as the COVID-19 pandemic. But our community lacks the on-going capacity for these successful dynamics to be active and effective on an on-going basis.

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- ▶ A growing and changing community like Mecklenburg County needs:
  - a) systemic capacities to meet health care needs that change and evolve;
  - b) ability and contingency plans to respond to crises and emergencies;
  - c) the ability to strategize, plan and make decisions at a community level;
  - d) a hub to collect, store, share and analyze key data to discern trends and make decisions in the future guided by the experience, wisdom and learning of our past.

## ACTIONS

20H

**Establish a digital health hub and data repository.** This health hub would allow sharing of information regarding existing and/or new developed healthcare gaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic, link a community of healthcare providers, encourage networking, connect community organizations and leaders, clinics, and providers, and encourage research sharing among providers to track trends that reveal gaps of care and resources. The County's Department of Health could use the data gathered to develop a measurable tool of provider accountability and transparency. The County would also provide a continuous review of staffing, facility and space, mental health, and specialty health services. This capacity could be represented by an already existing entity or newly developed for this specific purpose.

**21H**

**Review community/patient service access and use of health care resources within Medlink.** A comprehensive review of the use and access of free and low-cost health services made available through MedLink would enable assessment of needs in staffing, facilities and space, clinics, mental and emotional health services, and dental care. This information may also reveal how needs and gaps are being filled across available services and enable an integrative, systematic process of care, including capacity for overall continuous review and improvement.

**22H**

**Develop a strategy and increase public investments in resources for heightened acute and chronic care needs and management.** During the worst impacts of COVID-19, patients with non-COVID conditions delayed treatments and hospitals and health care professionals focused on pandemic responses. Fears of rising costs and fears of possible exposure to the virus led to cancelled appointments and regular assessments and treatments for chronic conditions being put off. Now, our health care facilities, professionals and systems are challenged to meet pent-up demand for non-COVID-19 related health care. A community-wide strategy and investments in health care needs and resources that may have atrophied during responses to COVID-19 is needed.

**23H**

**Create and empower an on-going COVID Recovery and Renewal public body.** The impacts and effects of COVID-19 are not yet fully known as the pandemic continues across the world and in our community. A standing body of community members appointed by the Board of County Commissioners can evaluate progress on the actions contained within these recommendations, serve to provide guidance and engagement from across sectors and levels in the community, and enable strategic assessment of progress and make recommendations for adjustments or revisions as needed, guided by data and expert input.



## STRATEGY

### Prioritize cultural awareness in health care.

Provide training for culturally sensitive and responsive practices while also increasing diversity within health care provider staffs across the community to help increase trust and ensure effective, respectful and trusted care.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- Resistance to COVID-19 safety protocols and guidance, testing and vaccination have highlighted the effects of cultural values, beliefs and norms as drivers of effective health care. Our efforts to recover and renew from the effects of COVID-19 must include responses that consider and are crafted to consider cultural awareness a lever for change.

## ACTIONS

24H

**Expand the availability of and support recruiting efforts for diverse health care workers.** A more diverse health care sector can positively affect care and outcomes for chronic illness, wellness, and mental health services. Our health care systems and networks should look like, be knowledgeable of, and understand how to deliver culturally relevant services.

25H

**Require and provide resources for cultural competency training.** Create and or deploy existing cultural competency training programs and resources for health care professionals across the community. Include staff in all medical sites affiliated with the county or providing services on behalf of the County.

26H

**Include a patient service and cultural sensitivity survey in after care.** Healthcare facilities conduct a simple healthcare visit survey to be administered to patients as a part of the discharge process for the purpose of providing information regarding services provided, quality of care, communication, cultural sensitivity and access to care. These surveys would be submitted anonymously by each patient rating their overall clinical visit. The survey would include topics such as provider-to-patient conduct (if professional, discriminatory, etc.), access and availability to services for non-English speaking patients, clinic maintenance and conditions, waiting room time, and similar questions with respect to HIPAA laws. The survey results should be available as public records and be monitored by the county's health department to monitor progress on reducing health disparities.

**27H**

**Develop culturally-based health education modules.** These tools can provide health education to diverse communities, train healthcare providers regarding providing culturally sensitive and responsive healthcare, provide health care informed responses to vaccination hesitancy and support aligned community outreach and trust building efforts with diverse communities.

**“Our efforts to recover and renew from the effects of COVID-19 must include responses that consider cultural awareness a lever for change.”**





## STRATEGY

### **Expand and promote mental health care and substance abuse treatment options.**

Provide free or significantly reduced cost mental health care to individuals and families who without financial assistance would have very limited or no access to proper mental or emotional health care.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ COVID-19 has impacted nearly every facet of life for Mecklenburg County residents from the direct medical effects on victims of the virus and the resulting pressures on family members, including saying goodbye to loved ones, a myriad of economic and financial impacts, and social and cultural impacts. Social isolation and distancing removed people away from familiar settings and made it difficult or impossible to be together with family members, loved ones, neighbors and colleagues.
- ▶ Front line workers in health care, public safety, emergency response, education, retail, the military and other key roles dealt with the fear of contracting the virus on a daily basis as they performed the responsibilities and duties of their jobs over extended hours and heightened expectations during stressful moments.
- ▶ The mental and emotional health and well-being of young people, children and older adults have been particularly affected. Familiar routines were disrupted, isolation from loved ones and caregivers was common, and traumatizing events and news filled media outlets, conversations and social media platforms. These pressures grew on top of already existing economic, social, political and financial forces that place many of our neighbors in mentally vulnerable positions.
- ▶ The resilience of our entire community has been, and is being, tested. The price of resilience, even if seemingly benign from the outside, is high on the inside for the mental and emotional health of people in our community. Mental health experts point to an increasing prevalence of anxiety, isolation, depression among patients. Rates and measures of substance abuse are climbing. Rising numbers of incidents of violent crimes are being reported by law enforcement.
- ▶ Together with measures for access to medical health care, access to mental and emotional health care, supports and treatment are critical to our community's overall recovery and renewal.

## ACTIONS

28H

**Expand the County's mental health and related support services.** Invest and provide increased resources to effective mental and emotional health programs, service providers and organizations where available now. Extend these services and supports to other sites currently providing medical health care to also provide free mental and emotional health tools, support and community connections that promote wellness, resilience and recovery. Mecklenburg County has included \$2 million in the 2022 adopted budget to support the creation of a Behavioral Health Urgent Care. This initiative will be in partnership with the Steve Smith Family Foundation. The goal of behavioral health urgent care centers is to provide a community-based option to stabilize individuals experiencing behavioral health crises in a way that reduces unnecessary trips to the emergency room, hospitalizations, and even incarcerations.

29H

**Initiate a mental health communications campaign to promote awareness on how and where to get help and to help remove stigmas around seeking support.** Reach the most unexposed community members and provide information regarding mental and emotional healthcare services. The strategy must provide clear information about stigma eradication and location of crisis and long-term services options, community supportive programs, faith community support, and culturally relevant appropriate care across the county. Information must be disseminated in English, Spanish and Vietnamese amongst all of these platforms and updated in a timely fashion.



**30H**

**Increase mental and emotional health supports in our schools for our students, educators and staff.** Provide free/reduced mental health support for children and young adults. Collaborate with and increase funding for private entities/non-profits in order to increase mental and behavioral health support for children, young people and the educators and staff of our schools at every grade level. The County has committed resources to CMS in the 2022 adopted budget to support the behavioral health needs of students with funding for 29 social workers, 10 psychologists, a social work coordinator and a pilot project for behavioral support centers for students in in-school suspension.

**31H**

**Adopt the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic Model (CCBHC) as a standard within our public health services, health clinics and providers.**

Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics, or CCBHCs for short, are entities specifically designed to provide a range of substance use and mental health services, especially for individuals who have the most complex needs. A Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic is a new form of provider within the Medicaid program, established by the Excellence in Mental Health Act. CCBHCs are designed to provide whole-person care by integrating physical health with a comprehensive range of mental health and substance use disorder services to vulnerable individuals. Whole-person care means considering all aspects of a person's health, including their physical, mental, and behavioral health, as well as their socioeconomic status, housing situation, and other social determinants of health which can exacerbate health issues. ([upliftfs.org](http://upliftfs.org))

**32H**

**Increase funding and resources for substance abuse treatment, therapy, recovery and care.** Data show that the impacts of COVID-19 have driven increased levels of alcohol and substance abuse in communities across the US. People who chronically abuse alcohol and drugs are more likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19, more likely to suffer from other medical and mental health issues, and more likely to become involved in crimes, domestic violence and abusive relationships. The County has committed resources in the 2022 adopted budget including \$75,000 to the Charlotte Rescue Mission for comprehensive substance use recovery services and \$50,000 to Hope Haven for therapeutic services for the children of parents who are struggling with substance use.



## STRATEGY

**Support the mental health needs of educators, school staff, childcare workers and other frontline staff dedicated to serving families with children and older adults.**

Acknowledge the heavy mental and emotional burdens of providing care and assistance to our most vulnerable community members. Pair celebration of these frontline worker heroes among us with real support for their mental and emotional needs.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

The pressures on caregivers for our community's children and older adults are varied and intense as they work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents - children and older adults. A variety of resources, organizations and institutions are focused on addressing the broad needs for K-12 education in our community and for providing adequate child care and adult care facilities, workers and supports. But the mental and emotional health of those who show up every day to meet the needs of those in their care could benefit from focused attention and investment. These investments could help maintain the mental and emotional health of these valuable providers in our community, and in turn, help them do their best work with our children and older adults.

## ACTIONS

**33H**

**Inventory access to mental health care for employees among educational, child care and adult care providers and devote targeted resources to fill in gaps where needed for front line workers in these sectors.** Help ensure employers serving in these areas are provided awareness building tools and easy access to mental health resources for their employees. Advocate for mental health supports to be included in covered insurance for these employees at the state level.

# Recovery & Renewal Focus Area:

# **Our Economic & Financial Futures**

## Impact Areas:

Arts and culture

Economic recovery, including help for small businesses

Jobs and workforce development

Housing and homelessness

Working families and vulnerable populations





## CORE GOAL

# Near-term economic needs driven by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis are met and resources have been invested to reduce or eliminate economic disparities.

Targeted strategies and actions within the impact areas of arts and culture, economic recovery, housing and homelessness and jobs and workforce development across the community provide a combination of immediate support and long-term closure of historic inequitable gaps.

## STRATEGY



### Provide aid and assistance for affordable housing, support for renters, homeowners, landlords, and people experiencing homelessness in our community.

Support existing programs and initiatives designed to place people and their families in housing who are experiencing homelessness and keep residents in homes where they live now to provide stability.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ The public and leaders across our community have identified housing security and homelessness as top priority issues facing the residents of Mecklenburg County for good reason. Health, economic security, educational attainment, and social and cultural vitality are all affected by people's claim to one key factor: having a safe, healthy and affordable place to call home for themselves and their loved ones.
- ▶ The task force recognizes the work of the community in addressing housing concerns through a variety of efforts, initiatives and resources to expand the supply, preserve the quality and affordability of affordable housing and to support family self-sufficiency. Our recommendations should be viewed as additive to existing efforts already underway, including:
  - ▶ Emergency and critical need funds are available from a variety of public and non-profit sources to persons experiencing immediate housing crisis.

- ▶ Voters approved a \$50 million affordable housing bond in 2018 and again in 2020 to help develop housing for low- to moderate-income families.
  - ▶ Private and philanthropic leaders and institutions have added nearly \$50 million to affordable housing efforts and the Housing Trust Fund.
  - ▶ Creative re-use of existing housing stock, innovative land allocations and expanded sources of financial capital have added to our shared response capacities.
  - ▶ The 2025 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing and Homelessness Strategy announced in April 2021 holds promise as a comprehensive and collaborative effort among private, public and non-profit partners to address housing and homelessness.
  - ▶ \$58 million Ascent Housing fund to buy older apartment buildings for rental to low and moderate income families.
- 
- ▶ Mecklenburg County has increased supports for affordable housing efforts in the adopted 2022 budget, including:
    - ▶ \$7 million to support annual rental subsidy funding. This includes \$1.6 million to expand the MeckHome Program.
    - ▶ \$1 million to continue funding for the Habitat for Humanity Critical Home Repair Program.
    - ▶ \$2.5 million to match City funding to support the purchase of a Shelter/Hotel by the Salvation Army.
    - ▶ \$512,000 for the Salvation Army Family Shelter.
    - ▶ \$750,000 to support expansion of The Relatives new On-Ramp Center.
    - ▶ \$250,000 for the HOMES Program. The program helps low to moderate income Mecklenburg County homeowners keep their homes by providing financial assistance.
    - ▶ \$530,000 for supportive services for those experiencing chronic homelessness. Includes Roof Above, Hillrock Estates and McCreesh Place.
    - ▶ \$82,000 to create a new Real Estate coordinator position to support the Elder Response and Habitat for Humanity Critical Home Repair programs
- 
- ▶ Recovery and renewal from the impacts of COVID-19 in our community will be enhanced or hampered by our ability to meet urgent housing needs but also to continue to address long-term housing availability, accessibility and viability for everyone in Mecklenburg County.
- 
- ▶ Progress is being made and efforts were being made prior to COVID-19's impacts. However, the impacts of COVID-19 have made our housing and homelessness issues even more acute for many people and more visible to all. We must continue to lift up challenges and find solutions together.

## ACTIONS

**1E**

**Provide direct financial assistance as eviction moratoriums end.** When the moratorium on evictions concludes, renters and landlords will be in precarious economic positions with many tenants still having an inability to pay and many landlords who have ongoing financial obligations. Direct financial assistance could help provide seamless housing for those renters disparately impacted by COVID as well as assist landlords in addressing their ongoing financial obligations exacerbated by the lack of consistent revenue due to the pandemic.

**2E**

**Provide increased supports to organizations providing temporary or crisis assistance to those experiencing homelessness or in imminent threat of homelessness.** Increase operational and direct assistance to clients resources available to non-profits, community-based organizations and other institutions that serve as service providers to individuals and families in need.

**3E**

**Expand resources for deposit, application fee and service fee waivers that are often barriers to those experiencing homelessness.** Scale successful programs that link persons experiencing homelessness or in imminent threat of homelessness with property owners willing to participate in these programs that also offer wrap-around support services to people most likely to establish housing independence.

**4E**

**Increase resources to agencies involved in supporting tenants' awareness of rights, responsibilities and resources in times of need.** Ensuring that tenants have the benefit of information concerning their rights, responsibilities and available resources as occupants of rental housing can help reduce anxiety, fear of the unknown and positive outcomes for renters and property owners.

**5E**

**Advocate for changes in use of background checks and criminal history as criteria for rental approvals.** Review and push for possible changes in state level policies and legislation that determine what criminal backgrounds may be considered when approving renters by property owners and managers of rental properties.

**6E**

**Explore prioritizing HOPE program awareness efforts and requests by zip code.** Rather than priority being assigned to renters seeking HOPE assistance on a first-come, first-served basis, study the possibility of shifting the focus to meet needs in areas most impacted historically and empirically by economic inequities.



## STRATEGY

**Increase access to work and employment opportunities by reducing technological, transportation and workforce barriers.**

Put resources behind creating the shortest paths between employers, open positions and residents seeking employment. Approach key points along the journey of employment as an opportunity to remove obstacles which may prevent qualified people from filling good jobs.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- Disconnects between people who are able and willing to work and opportunities for their employment have been slow to close in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers see needed roles go unfilled and are challenged to provide goods and services that meet the needs of customers and residents. Those seeking employment find frustrating obstacles if they do not have access to reliable, fast digital service (broadband service and equipment to utilize it), and/or availability of efficient or affordable transportation to interviews and prospective jobs. The pace of change and innovation already in motion across the economy has hastened as employers and employees adapted to the world of work in a pandemic environment, heightening the need for more training, education and skill-building opportunities in nearly every sector of our economy.



## ACTIONS

7E

**Revisit and analyze the recommendations of the Opportunity Task Force (now Leading on Opportunity) to grow economic mobility. Identify specific areas, programs or initiatives that the County could leverage for expedited progress.**

The County participated as a partner and resource with heavy involvement in the work of the Opportunity Task Force. Mecklenburg County then put actions and investments behind these economic mobility efforts, has included OTF strategic considerations in the County's regular planning cycles, and the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners has invested heavily over years in many areas to improve our community's economic mobility.

The work of Opportunity Task Force was comprehensive, well-researched, thoughtfully prepared and staffed for implementation. We do not seek to recreate substantial wheels and wish to maximize the impacts of existing efforts. Given the investments and actions by the County already in place to improve our economic future for all residents, the task force:

- ▶ refers with particular focus to the Health focus area recommendations as this sector was not explicitly included in the recommendations or work of the Opportunity Task Force.
- ▶ advocates a collaborative, community-wide revisit of the Opportunity Task Force plans and priorities to update progress, identify areas of lagging movement forward and highlight areas for collaboration between that ongoing work and the final actions from the Recovery and Renewal Task Force when approved by the Board of County Commissioners.
- ▶ affirms that the driving forces of economic mobility identified by the Opportunity Task Force and the resultant recommendations remain vital to both our community's future broadly and are now important to our successful recovery and renewal from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include recommendations and investments in:
  - ▶ the impacts and closing of gaps caused by segregation.
  - ▶ early care and education.
  - ▶ college and career readiness.
  - ▶ child and family stability.
  - ▶ social capital.

**8E**

**Invest more resources in closing the digital divide in our community faster through efforts in place now.** Support the efforts of collaborating agencies, organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), community-based groups and other partners who have the skills and plans to close these gaps and that could accelerate implementation with additional resources. Understanding that broadband adoption is a three-legged stool, the County should help facilitate the implementation of broadband strategies and organizations focused on access, devices, and education.

**9E**

**Require publicly available, broadband access to WiFi in all County public spaces.** This could include requiring publicly-available wifi access in all public spaces, buildings, facilities and parks either owned and operated by the County or where substantial County support is provided for public use and programs by agencies, organizations, centers and institutions. County community centers should be equipped with powerful WiFi boosting technologies to make access available in parking lots and in the immediate areas surrounding these centers across the community.

**10E**

**Invest with partners in additional rounds of Open for Business programs and Small Business Partner Support, Access to Capital, Workforce Partner and Innovate Business grants.** In our efforts to recover and renew, we should not confuse an Open sign in the window of small businesses for long-term vitality and sustainability. Surviving the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts has been exhausting for small businesses and those they employ. Resuming operations is one step, but ensuring quality, maintaining safe and healthy environments, providing dependable employment, and meeting the myriad of already pressing needs of small businesses cannot be assured without additional supports. The assistance and support for small business owners of Open for Business programs remain important as the timeline between the end of immediate supports and long-term recovery and renewal moves forward. The criteria for support and scale of supports may shift, but the abilities and capacities for small business owners to find capital programs, learn from the success stories of other small businesses, access COVID-19-related resources, work with mentors, boost visibility and connect residents to the services and goods they provide remain important.

**11E****Incentivize training and hiring of second-chance workers for Mecklenburg County employment opportunities, companies doing business in Mecklenburg County today and for companies considering locating to Mecklenburg County.**

The pressure on our criminal justice system brought by the closing of courts led to early release of persons from incarceration as a part of efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This trend has exacerbated the already existing problem of returning former inmates to productive work and employment. Our current situation gives an opportunity to establish an economic climate more supportive of transitional jobs growth. Successful second-chance employment programs also carry the benefits of reducing recidivism and improving public safety. Finding ways to boost employment is important for our recovery and renewal efforts. Tax incentives or other funding mechanisms could be deployed to reduce the barriers to employment for former inmates seeking jobs and help address worker shortages for employers.

**“In our efforts to recover and renew, we should not confuse an open sign in the window of our small businesses for long-term vitality and sustainability.”**



**12E**

**Increase investments in programs for job training, workforce preparedness and connecting job seekers to employers with open positions.** Leverage relationships with existing agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and community-based organizations (CRO's) in our community who could expand impact, train more people in workforce transition, and connect more people in our community seeking jobs with the organizations and employers who are hiring with additional resources.

These increased investments are in addition to enhanced investments in this area by Mecklenburg County in the 2022 adopted budget, including:

- ▶ \$884,000 for Road to Hire. The funding will connect 330 low-income high school seniors to programming, paid apprenticeships, college scholarships and life skills support.
- ▶ \$100,000 for marketing to promote the County's workforce development strategy.
- ▶ \$100,000 for monthly housing stipends for Meck Success clients for four months.
- ▶ \$98,000 to add an additional position in the County Manager's Office to manage the County's Workforce Development strategy.
- ▶ \$79,000 to create a Business Retention/Attraction position in the Office of Economic Development.
- ▶ \$77,000 to support the Center for Employment Opportunities to provide job opportunities for residents who were formerly incarcerated.
- ▶ \$75,000 for Youth Conservation Corps.
- ▶ \$75,000 in additional funding for the Center for Community Transitions to continue its work with previously incarcerated individuals.
- ▶ \$75,000 for a new position at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library to work on the digital divide and workforce development. The position will work to reduce the digital divide and develop sustainable workstreams to foster workforce development by leveraging library technology and resources.
- ▶ \$50,000 for the Small Business Consortium.
- ▶ \$30,000 for ASPIRE Community Capital. The nonprofit supports underserved residents who aspire to become or who are already entrepreneurs.
- ▶ \$25,000 for Prospera North Carolina. The nonprofit provides entrepreneurship programming such as seminars, consulting, grant, capital, or other planning services for Hispanic-owned small businesses.

**13E**

**Support efforts to invest in local infrastructure as a tool for job creation and for expanding transportation access to employment opportunities.** Transportation infrastructure not only connects people to jobs, it creates an economic base for jobs to directly build/maintain the assets, and indirectly grow the region to allow economic growth. Work in alignment with Mecklenburg Moves initiative and in tandem with expanded federal infrastructure plans and resources to achieve maximum impact.

**14E**

**Explore partnerships to connect local businesses with the marketing, logistics and distribution expertise of large corporations in our area (such as Amazon).** As people turn increasingly to digital shopping and delivery options, customers and local small businesses could connect to meet needs for goods and services while also bolstering the community economy. Small pilot programs could be tested in challenged areas to reduce transportation and time barriers for people struggling to meet basic needs in the wake of COVID-19 impacts.





## STRATEGY

### **Increase support for artists and the organizations that support them in the community.**

Activate a combination of tactics including direct assistance to full-time artists, expansion of opportunities for employment within their chosen field and support for services and organizations that can provide space, opportunities to engage with the public and networks for visibility in the community.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ Artists and others who work in our community's creative economy have been hard hit by venue closures, loss of planned work and disruption of openings, performances, and events that draw audiences and consumers of their work. Many artists, creatives and cultural organizations do not have dependable, viable streams of revenue.
- ▶ Our community is lessened when artists are unable to contribute the full breadth of their talents, skills and gifts. Artists often speak for and with many in the community who struggle to have a voice in ways that enable connection and relevance to others.
- ▶ Our community's ability to attract and retain talented people and the organizations that employ them is connected to the spirit of vitality, capacity for innovation and depth of cultural awareness that artists and creative economy workers bring to our community's competitive advantage.

## ACTIONS

**15E**

**Expand support for the Culture Blocks program to provide more direct employment opportunities for artists and creatives.** As a part of efforts to lift the nation out of the Great Depression, government served to employ artists, writers, performers and other creatives to capture the narratives of our nation and illuminate paths forward for people – this effort could be similar at a local scale.

**16E**

**Create or partner to resource and sustain existing community arts centers in challenged local areas and neighborhoods.** Having a central place and hubs for artists to collaborate, work, generate income, and promote their work is important for career sustainability. Access to the arts for underserved communities is important for overall development, education and connection to expression, culture and identity. Mecklenburg County has approved funds to support community art and outreach, including: \$80,000 in the 2022 adopted budget to support Arts+ in their new space at the historic Morgan School, \$500,000 to support Cain Center for the Arts, \$50,000 to support Park & Recreation's Therapeutic Recreation Program in partnership with the Arts and Science Council.

**17E**

**Increase funding Arts & Science Council (ASC) with specific focus on arts equity, inclusion, access and connection to challenged communities.** The organizations and artists supported by ASC and its sharpened focus on reducing inequities and disparities is an opportunity for the County to play an important role in our creative economy. Mecklenburg County has taken action already to increase funding to ASC in the 2022 budget by \$693,000 to a total of \$2.1 million in funding.

**18E**

**Lead a strategy focused specifically on enabling access to affordable housing for full-time artists in our community.** In concert with existing efforts to increase our community's affordable housing options and reduce homelessness, work with a specific goal of enabling and opening access to full-time artists in our community who often struggle to meet standard income requirements for rental and purchase of places to live.

# Recovery & Renewal Focus Area: **Our Community & Public Life**

## Impact Areas:

Non-profit recovery and human services

Education and childcare

Food security





## CORE GOAL

# Critical needs of Mecklenburg County residents, especially those most economically challenged, historically underserved and vulnerable, are met equitably.

Renewed, strengthened and resilient non-profit organizations, human services agencies, education and childcare providers, and food and nutrition networks.

The entire community benefits from investment in these impact areas in order to build pathways for shared economic vitality, good quality of life and stronger community bonds. Because of the disproportionate negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on some members of our community, progress towards this goal will be measured by meeting the needs of residents most disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. These residents include racial and ethnic communities (Black/African American, Latinx, Native American), immigrant communities, low-wealth families, older adults (60+ years of age), homeless persons and people with underlying medical conditions.

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## STRATEGY



### Prioritize assistance for non-profit organizations and boost investments in agencies meeting critical needs for people most impacted by COVID-19 and in areas most historically challenged.

Meet the needs of residents who have borne the brunt of the impacts of COVID-19 and support the organizations and agencies and networks that have provided safety, a degree of security and stability for many residents facing numerous challenges historically that are now made more severe.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- COVID-19 placed enormous strain on non-profit organizations and agencies providing critical services and goods across the community as residents struggled with economic hardships, health impacts, breakdowns in communications within familiar trusted networks and sources of support, transportation challenges and social isolation. Even with financial assistance and support, many non-profits and agencies found themselves nearly over-

whelmed to meet community needs as the number of volunteers available and willing to assist declined, essential supplies became harder to source and obtain, and front-line employees faced fears for their health due to COVID-19 and related mental and emotional stress.

- ▶ Smaller non-profits, grassroots assistance networks and community-based organizations faced especially acute challenges not just to meet the needs of their constituents but to respond to opportunities for organizational aid and assistance in the midst of scarce time and energy.
- ▶ Our community's non-profit sector and human service agencies provide vital supports for residents in our community and serve as points for connection for understanding and meeting the needs of people in the communities they serve. Investments in this sector are important to make continuing progress towards correcting historic inequities and to renewing and recovering from the impacts of COVID-19.

## ACTIONS

1C

**Make special effort for, and focus resources towards, non-profit organizations located in towns and rural areas of the county that serve residents outside the urban core and Charlotte city footprint.** Expand focus to the whole of the county to ensure adequate accessibility to citizens living outside of Charlotte and to provide support to organizations serving the greater Mecklenburg area. Build easier access to services for the county's homeless and displaced populations who must travel into Charlotte's core to register for essential services. Create mid-point locations within the towns to allow displaced and homeless residents to check into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) without traveling to center city Charlotte. Create or task County staff position as a liaison for the towns and the organizations serving residents in these areas to provide consistency of service and support.

2C

**Expand awareness, use and resources of 211.** Create and deploy an awareness campaign across the community to heighten knowledge of the information and resources currently available through 211. Bolster the content and resources available within 211 to include resources from area non-profits and community-based organizations.

**3C**

**Create a digital hub or establish a partnership with an existing provider (such as Share Charlotte) that can link non-profits to each other for sharing of information and resources, as well as to donors and volunteers who can help.**

The hub could serve as a repository of helpful data and information for smaller non-profits, as well as the community at-large. Through the hub, collaborations could be enabled among non-profits, agencies, faith communities and grassroots initiatives who serve similar or overlapping populations in our community. People who want to help on an on-going basis or in times of emergencies or critical needs could go to the hub to research options for donations of financial resources or volunteer time specific to their areas of interest.

**4C**

**Establish a non-profit/grassroots mentorship program or partner with existing mentorship programs (such as Unite Charlotte).** Build the capacities and effectiveness of emerging and smaller grassroots non-profits and their leaders by connecting them with the experience and wisdom of larger non-profits.





## STRATEGY

### **Bolster community food security efforts and reduce the footprint of food deserts.**

Deploy a combination of awareness building, access expansion, and organizational supports to create a multi-faceted approach to our community's pressing food insecurities.

## WHY (GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES)

- ▶ Food security is a household's ability to access nutritious foods, which contributes to an active and healthy life through physical, social, and economic means. According to Mecklenburg County Public Health, nearly 15% of households in Mecklenburg County are considered food insecure. That means they have a reduced quality and variety of diet, may eat less, and that their eating patterns are disrupted due to lack of money and resources.

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- ▶ Food security issues and low-quality nutrition issues were exacerbated by COVID-19, especially in areas of our community already challenged. Food security issues are more prevalent and can be mapped by income and wealth gaps seen within the crescent of Mecklenburg County. Poverty is still real in these communities, though it may look different. People are still living paycheck to paycheck – people have lost their jobs or are underemployed. Lower income individuals do not always have access to transportation or access to obtain fresh produce.

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- ▶ In 2021, the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners placed a priority on addressing food security and allocated resources to scale up programs that provide healthier food in food insecure locations.

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- ▶ Among the programs is an expansion of "You SNAP, We Match," with initial funding by Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina. This initiative allows residents to utilize their SNAP/EBT benefits at participating farmers' markets while receiving a dollar-for-dollar match on their purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables. The initiative also welcomes four new farmer's markets to Mecklenburg County in 2021. Two of the new markets are pop-ups organized by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Food Policy Council with funding from MCPH to serve their immediate neighborhoods:
  - ▶ Valerie C. Woodard Center
  - ▶ The Plaza Academy for Youth
  - ▶ Camp North End
  - ▶ Urban Farm at Aldersgate

- ▶ Other current initiatives to address food security in the county include:
    - ▶ A refrigerator pilot program through the County's Healthy Corner Store initiative, providing healthy fruits, vegetables, and other foods at locally-owned corner grocery stores. This program includes promotion by the American Heart Association of healthy options and signage for recipes.
    - ▶ Development of additional locations of community orchards and gardens through the Edible Landscapes Program.
    - ▶ A partnership with Rivendell Farms of the Carolinas to develop and expand interactive online food resource maps, with information including food banks and boxes, delivery, free lunches, farmers markets, and more.
    - ▶ A partnership with Reinvestment Partners to expand its food as prescription program model in Mecklenburg County grocery stores.
    - ▶ Carolina Farm Trust has purchased land and is activating three catalyst farms in the community with the goal of making the area a global leader in sustainability by feeding the region with food from local farms.
- 
- ▶ Even with these laudable programs and initiatives, the need for food security is tremendous in our community. According to local media reports, local food provider Loaves & Fishes fed enough people in one year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to fill up Bank of America stadium, or roughly 80,000 people in Charlotte and our surrounding counties.
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- ▶ Renewal and response goals now should focus on working and providing resources with increased urgency to improve healthy food environments and consumption of water, and address food deserts (low-income areas without a supermarket or large grocery store.) Food deserts lead to poor diets, which can contribute to obesity, Type-2 diabetes, and heart disease. Low-income individuals are also more likely to be exposed to advertising for unhealthy food products. Even when access to food is improved, healthy foods tend to cost more. (source: mecknc.gov)

## ACTIONS

5C

**Expand access at the neighborhood level with more small pop-up markets, gardens and mobile fresh food buses.** Build or support pop-up community driven farmers markets and/or community gardens on county land – including in the towns and/or county owned parks. Include funds for upkeep, marketing, funds for staff/volunteers, and other operational needs. Fund a Fresh Produce Bus operation to deliver fresh produce to specific zip codes within food deserts on a regular schedule.

**6C****Expand awareness of available food and nutrition resources and locations.**

Create and deploy additional communications, outreach and marketing efforts in areas closest to food deserts to expand awareness and use of farmer's markets, nutrition programs, food banks, pantries, food boxes and mobile or pop-up markets. Work in tandem with neighborhood health liaisons (see Health recommendations) and community ambassadors. Promote the existing Food and Farm Map as a key component of outreach.

**7C****Provide transportation resources and options to get people to food resources.**

Provide resources for families to connect them to transportation in a variety of ways including CATS, LYFT/Uber rides, County-funded ridesharing and other programs.

**8C****Provide resources for volunteer recruitment and deployment among food providers.**

Expand volunteer access to non-profits and boost investment in community platforms that connect organizations and volunteers. Utilize the hub previously described to help meet the need for volunteers to assist in distribution of perishable food to families.

**9C**

**Partner with trusted organizations serving undocumented residents.** Expand awareness of resources and reduce fears associated with obtaining food from markets, community gardens and other sources. Emphasize that these resources are here for them and that they are safe places for obtaining needed food supplies, interaction and gathering.





